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< Chapter Three: Zara and David I (/en/story/127504/chapter/chapter-two-angelique-ii-388191/)

January 10th, 2031

Where do I begin...? Alez Braviel, born on February 17th, 2000. Austrian. My parents aren't relevant to this story, just a

loving office worker and a housewife who paid for my education in hopes that I would become someone. But I had different ideas. Well... they weren't exactly ideas, more like my mediocrity kept me from excelling in my studies, and I always barely passed. Yes, I'm not very smart.

What was left for me after finishing high school, then? That's right, I enlisted in the army purely for the paycheck. The epitome of mediocrity, as you can see. Nothing went as expected. There are always completely unpredictable factors that end up altering everything without us being able to do anything about it. It's... frustrating in a way. After all, who could have foreseen such a bloody war?

The training lasted two years, from 2018 to 2020. Right after that, the war broke out. This happened on a... I think I remember... no, I don't recall exactly. I only know it was in April. Even today, I can't be sure if the insurgents just took advantage of the situation or if they were the real cause. It doesn't matter, does it? Even if I had been more aware of what

was happening... nothing would have been different.

. . .

April, 2020

"Alez, you awake?"

Lost in my thoughts, as usual. My gaze was buried in the bland cup of tea before me, and the dark circles under my eyes signaled that I had no intention of paying attention to my surroundings. The voice calling me repeated itself a couple more times, but my lethargy was so immense that I simply tried to pretend I hadn't heard it until it became too annoying to ignore.

"Yes, I'm awake."

"Then pay attention to the news, it's terrifying."

That was David, one of my squadmates, sitting right across from me on the long plank serving as a table for about ten others. Like me, he was an assault role player and... a lively person, to put it mildly. Don't get me wrong, I really appreciated David; he was one of my only two friends in the force. With his orange hair and facial features that would have suited a model more than a soldier, David Vann Floors enjoyed great popularity throughout the military for his good nature and charisma. The bastard had it easy.

"More riots?"

I let out that question while glancing at the screen across the mess hall. It was impossible to hear what the slightly agitated reporter was saying due to everyone chatting during their routine breakfast, so I could only try to discern what was happening based on the images. 'Seven dead and fourteen injured in the

latest protest' read the screen.

"Yes, and I doubt they'll stop anytime soon."

"I can't recall why they started, to be honest."

"No one's very sure, Alez. I think it all began with some protest in... Spain, I think. Wasn't there a corruption scandal or something?"

"And what the hell do we have to do with that?"

"That's the issue! The protests spread across various countries in an apparent universal demand for greater government transparency, but in most nations, that demand didn't seem very strong."

"So?"

"An excuse, my young Alez."

"We're almost the same age. What do you mean by an excuse?"

"I read this online a few days ago: many theorize that all the listed reasons are just excuses to mobilize as many people as

possible."

"Is the idea to destabilize the government?"

"Perhaps."

The horn announcing the end of breakfast time sounded, interrupting our conversation for a few seconds. I used the pause to gulp down my entire cup in one go.

"Any idea who's behind it all? Assuming such a conspiracy theory is true, of course."

"No, no clue."

"Figured as much."

Though we treated the topic with due seriousness, neither of us gave real credit to such stories. I mean, anyone can go on an anonymous forum and spin a tale convincing enough for people to believe it, but we, as soldiers, couldn't assume something like that could be real. In a

matter of such gravity, surely we'd be informed before anyone else. Or so we thought. The days passed, and, like the nagging back pain we all decided to ignore until it leaves us paralyzed, the scandals and riots became increasingly common without anyone making a real effort to find any hidden plot behind the growing chaos in half of Europe.

...

"The death toll has surpassed a hundred, hasn't it?"

The shooting range. It was our platoon's turn to use it for practice, but with everyone so focused on the evolving conflict, few stepped away from their conversations to pick up a weapon. Even First Sergeant Kyd, our platoon leader, was sharing his opinions with everyone without noting those skipping training. The sun wasn't too warm, occasionally hidden by clouds.

"The violence escalated too quickly. Is it right to still consider them mere protests?"

"I don't know, and I also don't understand why the government hasn't addressed it."

"Maybe they're trying to make it seem less terrible." "I doubt it. I really think they're as clueless as we are."

Ideas flew back and forth so dynamically that it was hard to keep track of who said what. I was silent, lacking both information and interest. Had I known the real importance of it all... no, I probably wouldn't have said anything even if I'd known how much my life would change once the war started. I glanced around the range, trying to count all the platoon members, and noticed some were missing while only one person held a rifle.

"Typical..."

I murmured and then distanced myself from the men and their rushed

conclusions, walking slowly and silently toward the other person I considered a friend.

"..."

A shot. A shell hitting the ground. Six seconds of distant chatter. Another shot. That was Zara. The sniper of our platoon was the closest thing I'd ever seen to a beast in human form. I always thought it was some enchantment that made me addicted to watching her meticulously fire her SSG 69. From the first time I saw her unfold the bipod, press the stock against her shoulder, and tighten her lips while squinting, I was hooked on watching her shoot. "Beautiful" is a fitting word, but "wild" describes it better. Let me explain: If Angelique is a machine entering combat to eliminate her target quickly, regardless of resources spent, Zaralyne Heart was an efficient animal striking the weak spot of her prey, taking it down with one shot even if it meant taking all the time in the world. Each time the trigger was pulled

and the weapon recoiled, the loose strands of her dark blue-black hair swayed violently, her arms releasing tension only to regain it just before the next shot.

"Aren't you going to take a break? You've been shooting since we arrived."

"Huh?"

My voice seemed to break her concentration because the murderous aura she emitted moments ago vanished as quickly as she removed her finger from the trigger guard.

"Alez. Wait, why do you say it like I'm doing something wrong? The shooting range is the only thing keeping your shooting skills from rusting."

"I'm not reproaching you for using the time well. I'm just curious if you're even slightly interested in the battles between police and protesters."

"Oh, that... of course, I am, like anyone, but I don't see the point in guessing what's

happening from the comfort of the base. We're the army, aren't we? We should be more involved to know what's really going on."

Always so practical.

"Do you think the time will come when we have to go out and hunt terrorists?"

"I don't know, Alez. I don't think you used that word wrongly, but I see it as a distant moment when we're ordered to shoot our own citizens."

"Over a hundred dead already; it doesn't seem so illogical to me."

I took a seat on a nearby bench and patted the space beside me, inviting her to join. She seemed hesitant, making a doubtful gesture, but after checking the small ammunition box by her rifle, she sighed and walked over to sit next to me.

"I don't want my first real combat to be against protesters armed with sticks and

stones, Alez. That's not why I train so hard."

"Would you feel the same if they were better armed?"

"As I said, they're still citizens. They're still neighbors, right? I wouldn't feel good about shooting them."

"Then why train here if not to keep the peace, Zara?"

"To protect the country. Isn't that what we're all here for in the end?"

"I understand, and those protesters are still part of the people, even if they're violent."

"Exactly. It's not that simple."

Determination was something she never lacked. She was stubborn, and quite so. I always assumed she must have been raised that way, in the countryside. Zara lost her parents when she was a child, and since then, her grandfather took care of her. According to her, it was he who taught her how to shoot.

"You don't seem to think the same, Alez."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you interested in defending the nation as you're supposed to?"

I remember that question caught me off guard. Just as I chose to look at the sky to ponder a response, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds and blinded me for a moment, so I lowered my gaze to the ground again. There, I found a dozen men in green uniforms arguing heatedly, searching for possible answers to the question concerning those later recognized as the terrorists of Amere. Each and every one of those men once swore to give their lives for the country, and of course, I had too, but unlike them, I was never very sure about it.

"The truth is... I wouldn't know how to answer that."

"Hehe, I expected that response."

The skilled shooter placed a hand on my head and tried unsuccessfully to ruffle my then very short hair.

"Don't overthink it, young Alez. If you're still here with us after two years since you enlisted voluntarily, there's something keeping you tied."

And she was only two years older than me.

Zara and David always treated me like the youngster who needed to be protected and trained. A model who captivated with his looks and a strange farm girl with excellent shooting skills. Terrible mentors.

"Maybe it's the paycheck."

"No one would stay to suffer here just for the money, Alez."

"Really...?"

I saw Zara's thin lips begin to form a

small smile, and before she could respond, I heard the voice of Moser, the sergeant who assisted Kyd, ordering us to return to training immediately.

. . .

We had no idea, but the war had already begun by then. Entire towns on the outskirts of France, Spain, and Italy had been captured and were under the control of the same multinational group that planned to change the world. There were already clandestine weapons caches in Germany, Austria, and Poland that would later be used to supply combatants in the bloody urban skirmishes that would begin occurring across the continent a few months later. The politicians, as cowardly and opportunistic as ever, had their own escape and security plans. Unlike the ignorant masses, they were well aware of what awaited the country but prioritized safeguarding their own lives over warning the people who paid their salaries.

The high command of the armed forces already knew the danger, but there was no way to act without drawing attention, and drawing attention would undoubtedly lead to panic. Their hands were tied. With the pieces in place, the next part is quite predictable. In June of that same year, we found ourselves traveling from our base in the third infantry brigade towards the west, to support the twelfth infantry unit in their fight against the terrorists uprising in Linz. It was a disaster.

"It's so hot."

"We're heading into summer, it's to be expected."

The entire platoon was aboard a CH-47 Chinook. We weren't alone; two more platoons accompanied us. Kyd and Moser were up front doing paperwork, but the rest of us were together, looking at each other with anticipation and fear for what awaited us. From Zara talking calmly, trying to ease her spotter Magiera's nerves,

to medic Allen meditating silently, and the recon duo, Helek and Nidda, making a rough count of the armed forces' casualties so far.

"Yeah..."

"Are you scared, Alez?"

"I'm not sure if it's fear I feel, but I can't stay calm."

"Care to explain it better?"

I stopped looking at the serene landscape outside the helicopter window and turned to David. He looked somewhat like an older brother trying to understand his little sibling's problems on their first days of school.

"What do you want me to explain?"

"Are you afraid of combat, Alez?"

"It's not that I have a greater fear of dying than anyone else, it's just..."

"Just?"

"Have you ever killed anyone before,

David?"

"No, of course not."

"And do you think you'll be able to raise your rifle to kill strangers as soon as we get off this aircraft?"

"That's what we've been training for. We're facing people causing severe harm to the nation and who've taken many lives. Hesitating will only make us the ones who get killed."

"I suppose so..."

I somehow sensed the Chinook's speed decreasing as I looked out the window again, and a voice came through the speakers on the metal walls covered with equipment and weapons.

"Descent in five minutes. All personnel prepare for deployment."

"Attention."

The next to speak was First Sergeant Kyd. The man was experienced. He always

had a stern expression, and every word and movement he made was covered by an air of elegance that made him look deserving of his position. His broad chin emphasized his masculine voice, and his constant look of readiness was enviable.

"The combat zone covers the entire northern part of Linz. And by north, I mean everything above the Danube. It's an area of about twenty-three square kilometers, and no sector is under army control."

"So the entire region has been taken?"

"That's correct. The residents have likely been taken as prisoners and will be used as shields and bargaining chips, so we are not authorized to use heavy vehicles or any kind of artillery."

"All residents taken as prisoners? How many are we talking about, sir?"

"We don't even have an estimate, but the police force was easily overwhelmed, so expect heavy resistance."

That knot I had only felt before during school exams or when lying to my parents grew in my stomach, but this time it was gigantic and heavy, making me nauseous.

"We will be descending on a route to the west. Reports indicate no hostiles present in the landing zone, but there's no doubt we'll attract attention upon arrival. The first order after landing is to quickly find cover in nearby buildings and neutralize or eliminate any hostile elements."

"Landing in one minute."

"Everyone up."

With our weapons loaded and ready for combat, we watched as the gate slowly opened when we were already ten meters above the ground.

"This will be your first time in combat, platoon. Put these years of training into practice, and everything will go well. Trust your comrades and don't act rashly."

And so came my baptism by fire. In a city I had never set foot in before, facing people born on the same soil as me.

I'll be honest, I don't remember much of what happened then. This was... ten years ago. Yes, ten years ago from when I'm writing this. I vaguely remember descending from the helicopter and following my comrades to the nearest building to establish a basic defense. The sound of gunfire erupted almost immediately, and although I couldn't see exactly where it started, I did catch sight of a medic from the last platoon to descend getting hit in the neck by a bullet. I will never be able to erase that scene from my memory. The boy, who seemed to be my age, fell to the ground clutching his throat and was quickly dragged to the side by his companions, but it was too late. I later learned that he died right there, drowning in his own blood.

...

My standard-issue weapon was the AUG A3, loaded with 5.56x45mm ammunition and equipped with a reflex sight. The battle had started about an hour earlier, and we couldn't move from our position until the other two platoons secured the surroundings. We had really chosen the worst possible position. 'Take the city zoo's parking lot' was our first assigned objective.

"Number of hostiles?!"

"Nineteen confirmed, but there are definitely more!"

Four of us were taking cover behind a spacious security booth while the rest of my comrades were inside, with the radio operator communicating the operation's progress and Allen treating Mike, one of our own, who had been shot in the leg.

"Recon will stay here until we clear a safe route to the booth on the other side of the parking lot! Alez, Javier, David, and I

will advance between the vehicles! Helek and Nidda will cover us!"

"Yes, sir!"

The shout was in unison.

"Heart, can you hear me in there?!"

"Loud and clear, sir!"

Both Zara and her spotter were inside the booth, which seemed to be the only relatively safe place around.

The long parking lot occupied an entire block, was completely barricaded, and was crammed with abandoned cars organized in two long columns, leaving a wide space in the center. We could barely hear Kyd's orders through the incessant gunfire that was chipping the paint off the building behind us.

"I want you and Magiera to take out the targets from inside the booth!"

"Understood, sir!"

There was no time to keep planning. If we were facing even a slightly intelligent enemy, it was only a matter of time before they decided to flank us. With this in mind, the first sergeant looked at each of us once, pulled a smoke grenade from his tactical vest, and threw it right in front of the booth, creating a curtain that allowed us to split into two groups and run in opposite directions to hide behind different vehicles. By the time the smoke began to clear, my comrades had already opened fire on the hooded terrorists on the other side. And I say my comrades because fear had paralyzed my right hand, and although I forced myself to lift the rifle and aim, I couldn't bring myself to fire a single shot.

"Alez, what the hell is wrong with you?!"

The one yelling in my face was David. He had just taken a few lives seconds earlier, and I couldn't understand how he

managed to keep his mind clear. My reaction was typical of a coward, but David, with the same amount of training as me, already looked like a seasoned veteran.

"If you're going to be a hindrance, then run to the booth, but stop being dead weight!"

His words hurt. David had never treated me harshly before. But he was right; I was only embarrassing my instructors and hindering the entire operation. So, out of respect for my comrade and to ensure the completion of the primary objective, I shouted back after shaking my head vigorously and swallowing hard.

"I'm going to fight, David!"

"Then shoot!"

Without a second thought, I exposed part of my body from behind cover and pulled the trigger of my AUG. It was

evident I wasn't aiming directly at any target, just laying down suppressive fire over a group of enemies to keep them pinned down, but that seemed to be enough for David, for the moment.

The confrontation lasted a while, and I managed to be helpful without having to kill anyone. Most of the casualties were inflicted by David, Kyd, Zara, and Javier. The enemy's gunfire was decreasing, highlighting the fact that they were falling like flies, one by one. It's no wonder if you stop to think for just two seconds: ten well-trained soldiers with better weapons are more than enough to handle thirty unprotected terrorists carrying much less technologically advanced arms.

And here's why this particular part of the operation, that is, the clearing of the parking lot, is the only moment I remember with almost total clarity.

We were already taking more than half the ground, with about six hostiles still active. David and I advanced cautiously, jumping from vehicle to vehicle, while he

handled the killing, and I provided suppression and cover.

"Just three more rows of cars, and we'll have covered the entire parking lot. How are you on ammo, Alez?"

"One and a half mags left."

"Same here. Should be enough."

Gunshots from Zara echoed many meters behind us, along with Kyd's orders to Javier.

"One more time: cover me while I move to the next car, and then I'll return the favor."

"Understood!"

It happened so fast. David darted out from cover at full speed, and I stood up to provide support. He took only two steps beyond our makeshift shelter before being struck in the right side by two bullets. Luckily, they were small-caliber and were

stopped by his standard-issue Kevlar, though the force of the impacts knocked him to the ground.

"Da-!"

My heart jumped as I saw him fall. Mechanically, I turned in the direction from which the shots had come.

Time began to flow irregularly. From the moment I saw that man with an MP5K shift his focus from David to me, the seconds felt endless. He had long brown hair and only covered the lower half of his face with a black bandana. As soon as he saw my weapon aimed at him, his eyes widened, and he chose me as his priority target.

It was already too late for him. While he was just raising his submachine gun, I had already centered my red dot sight on his right eyebrow. It wasn't training. It wasn't at all the daily drills that made me fire; I'm sure it was simply the terror of being killed right there.

Bullet after bullet after bullet. Though one shot would have been enough, I couldn't help but empty the remaining rounds into his face. His death was so grotesque that I can perfectly recall how the first bullet cruelly shattered his skull, and the subsequent ones deformed his face until it was unrecognizable.

When he hit the asphalt, he was no longer a person but a body with half his head atomized, his gray matter splattered against the van behind him.

I stood there for a couple of seconds, silent and with my mouth half-open, watching the blood escape the corpse. My first kill, the first time I stopped another human being's heart.

Then I heard my name from David's voice, and then from Kyd's. And after that...

Nothing. I don't remember anything else about the operation in Linz. I don't know what we did next or how we reclaimed the city. Like an amnesiac, everything that happened that day is simply no longer in

my head. I don't think it's because of the number of years that have passed, it's... I don't know, I don't know, and that's what saddens me the most.

. . .

Back on the Chinook. My entire platoon was safe, returning to base. In the helicopter, there was only silence in respect for the fallen medic, our sole casualty. No one spoke. I didn't know how many hours had passed or how I ended up with that red-stained bandage on my right arm.

Zara was beside me, sleeping with her head resting on my shoulder as I gazed out the window at the same landscape I had seen on the way there, but this time it was early morning. On the other side was David, staring at me while holding something on his abdomen that I can't quite remember.

"Alez..."

"...."

He wanted to say something, but I respected the silence because my own thoughts were too chaotic to pay him any attention. The only sound I wanted to keep hearing was Zara's gentle breathing, which managed to vaguely calm me.

"You did very well today, Alez."

"...."

"Really... really well."

I don't know if he meant it or if he just wanted to encourage me, but I chose not to respond and kept looking out the window.

...

Today, I wish I had thanked him.

Aug. 28, 2021, 10:03 p.m. 6 comments



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S A **SHIKI AllCaps** @shiki_all_capitals (/en/u/shiki_all_capitals/)

Good chapter. Love how David's words at the end mirror what Alez told Angelique in the previous chapter, as it gives that interaction some extra weight. What can I say except, 'You did really, really well'

[Reply comment](#) 0230 (/en/dashboard/story/comment/717166/vote/up/)



Hazo @hazo (/en/u/hazo/)

Thanks so much! And I'm glad that you noticed that detail.

March 31, 2025, 03:17  (/en/dashboard/story/comment/717170/vote/up/)



Acades @acadesreal1687241949 (/en/u/acadesreal1687241949/)

This chapter was great, very real and the imagery is amazing.

[Reply comment](#) 07:04 (/en/dashboard/story/comment/380113/vote/up/)



August Forneart @channich (/en/u/channich/)

It gets better and better, Hazo! Your pacing is great, and you do a great job of conveying raw emotion...which is something I would never do as a poet, but different strokes! Hehe ^.^

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Patricia Hernandez @sandramahler_ (/en/u/sandramahler_/)

Incredibly raw, I'm loving the story.

[Reply comment](#) 13:18 (/en/dashboard/story/comment/317932/vote/up/)



Hazo @hazo (/en/u/hazo/)

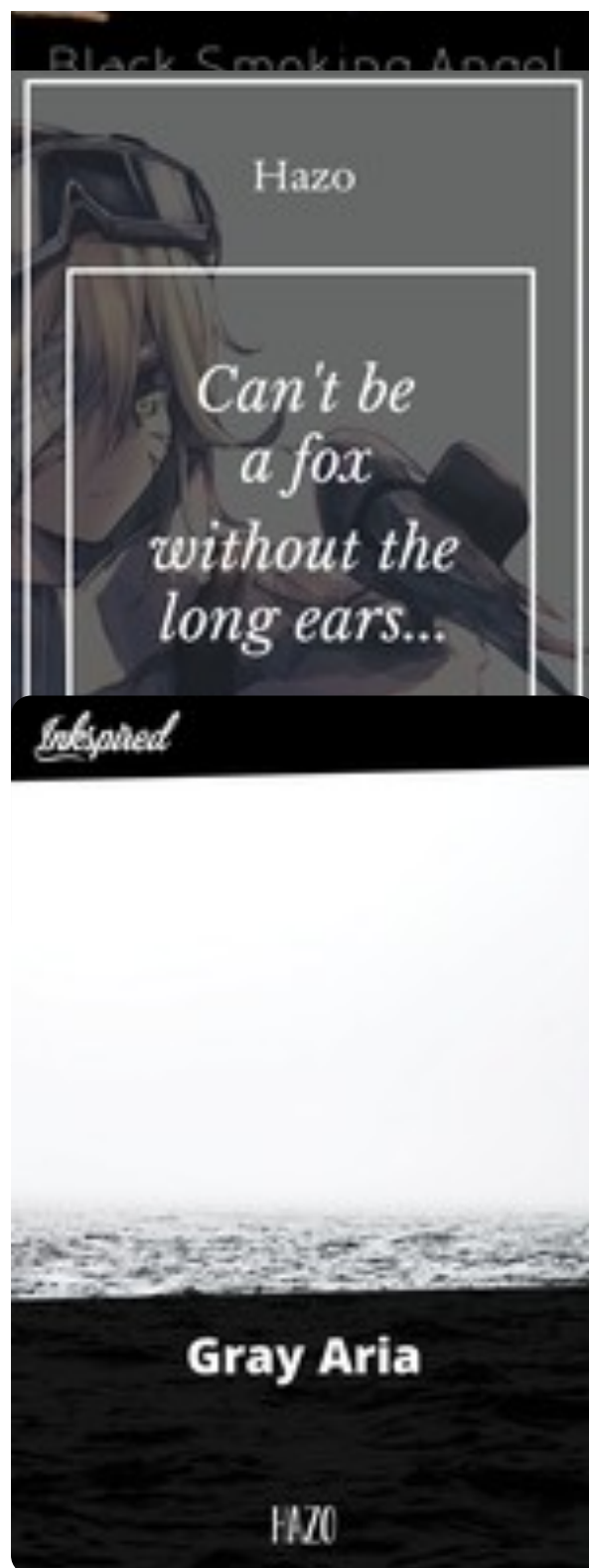
Thanks you so much! It makes me really happy when people drops their opinion!

January 01, 2023, 23:34 ♡ (/en/dashboard/story/comment/317933/vote/up/)

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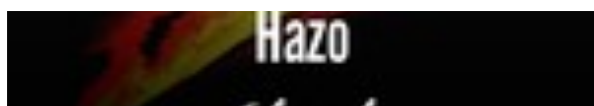
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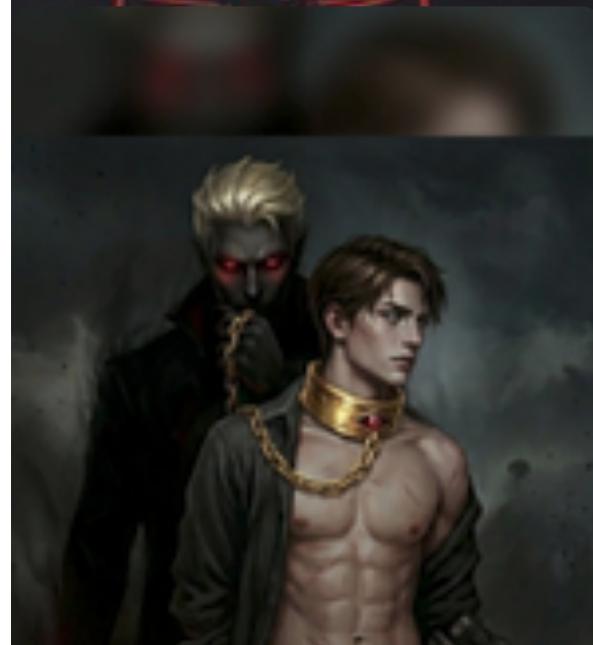
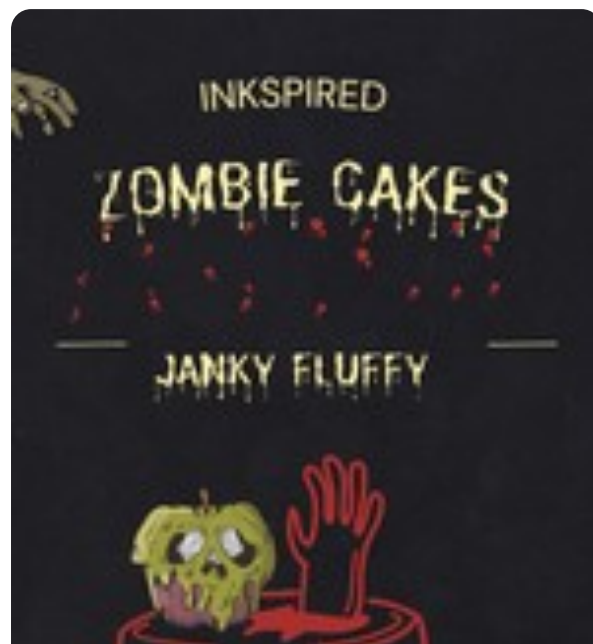
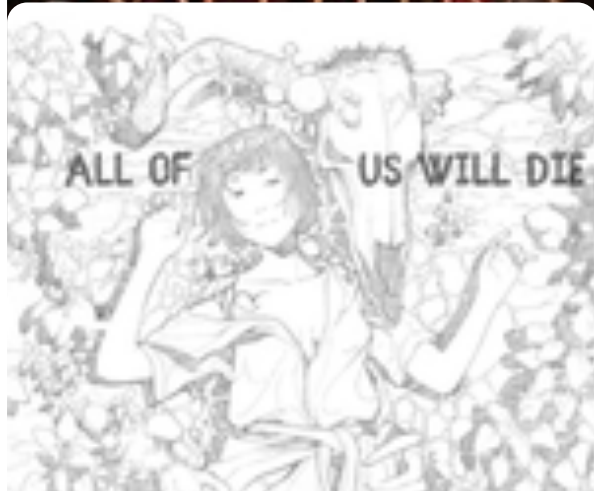


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